

reSource Chat with Christian de Lutz, Art Laboratory Berlin

Art Laboratory Berlin was founded in Autumn 2006 by an international team of art historians and artists. As a non-commercial art space, Art Laboratory Berlin was established as a platform for inter-disciplinary projects in an international context.

r: Can you introduce the background of Art Laboratory Berlin (ALB), and tell us about the history of the place?

C: In 2006, my partner Regine Rapp, two other colleagues Margareta Tillberg and Sandra Frimmel and I had a series of meetings and talks about the idea of curating and the contemporary art world in Berlin. I think we all came to this position that there were a lot of things we found interesting that were not being shown here, and we weren't happy with the quality of exhibitions we were seeing in many spaces, especially more established spaces. We came to the view that we should at least try to found a space. [...] We came upon this space here at Prinzenallee for several reasons: one was that there was a project here [Kolonie Wedding] that arranged very inexpensive space rentals. It is temporary use, but it is open ended. And it's sponsored by degewo [one of Berlin's largest residential property company]; we pay very little, that made it possible.

We decided that it would be both interesting, and also bring a lot of dynamics and connecting things we found interesting to do a set of interdisciplinary series; we started off with art and music, then art and text, and then art and science. We wanted to work with Critical Art Ensemble, but during art and science, the case against Steve Kurtz came to an end [and he wasn't available] so we decided to do a series of art and law [a year later and invited him to this]. We've done a number of different other exhibitions, we've done some visiting shows as well, we've had always a bit of new media, but also a lot of hybrid exhibitions, as part of our interdisciplinary approach. And

in 2010, we had an open call on two themes, one was 'Time and Technology', and the other was 'Synaesthesia'. Part of the interest was to take these two themes which on the one hand you could think back 100 years and connect with the avant-garde of the 1900s and 1910s, but we wanted to see what is the 21st century's take on that, how the technological events of the last quarter century affected our sense of time and how artists are dealing with that.

With 'Synaesthesia' we were particularly interested in the idea of neurological phenomenon of synaesthesia, and artists who worked with that. We are in the midst of the Time and Technology series, and in the late autumn we will have the start of Synaesthesia that will run through the first half of next year.

r: I was really amazed by the fact that you and Regine are often also addressing Eastern countries. People coming from the East is not really something usually found in a gallery, especially in the so-called media art scene.

C: I think it has to do also with our personal biographies. I spent a lot of time in the nineties travelling around Eastern Europe. I was working as a photojournalist. Regine and Sandra lived in Russia for several years. I think in the first year, three of our four first exhibitions showed artists from Russia, and later we were showing artists from the Middle East, but we are really interested in a diversity of themes. We don't have a focus in a specific direction, but we have interests like art and science, technology, new media, and Regine has a very strong interest in book art; it is really

hybrid.

r: How do people perceive what you do in the Wedding area? Why did you choose to be exactly here, and not in Mitte, as many other galleries?

C: The original choice was pragmatic: we looked in Neukölln and here. I've actually got very attracted to this area, it is my favourite part of Berlin, [...] this kind of mix between people that work in the arts, but also from immigrant communities, and transitory people who come here, and then they move on to somewhere else. [...] The tendency is that people come here when they first come to Berlin, they often move on, once they've got a better job. I would say that a lot of public we get are [...] interested in the exhibitions themselves, or a lot of local artists, sometimes we get people from the neighbourhood wandering in. [...] It was very difficult to get German artists, who were living in Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg or Neukölln, to come to Wedding. If they are American, French or Iranian, they come here, if they had an interest in the theme or even just in art.

I always feel that there is this hierarchy here. In New York, I've worked in off-galleries even when I was in college in the eighties, and you would always see museum curators, people from MOMA, the Guggenheim – they were interested in what was new. But here you don't see curators of the big galleries and museums coming here, and looking around for what is new. [...] It is almost as if they feel they have to discover something new on a trip to London and New York, but not what is new in Berlin. Although there is probably a lot more creative

talent now in Berlin then there is in London or New York.

r: How do you think your gallery relates to the city of Berlin? Sometimes it is common to say that in Berlin people never leave their neighbourhoods...

C: We try to offer things you can't see elsewhere. And that's the reason we often have artists from elsewhere. We have never shown painting here. There are 400 galleries here, and most of them show painting [...]. We always have new people, a large number of people who follow what we do; our Facebook has 1.991 people now. We have newsletters, also the press mailing, a blog, the website and Facebook. We played around Google+ and Twitter, but they don't seem to function as well.

I would say it's not so much the neighbourhood, but people having their own cliques and circles. It's this archipelago thing when something is only in their circle. There is nothing tying together everything in the city – at least in the art world. There are many art worlds. Everything is constantly shifting – and also sometimes you don't know about things. The German cultural scene even in Berlin is extremely hierarchical. The off-scene is disadvantaged by this natural hierarchy. People from the mainstream don't go to off-spaces, galleries in Mitte don't go off to others. The experimental and new is very low in the hierarchy.

r: Connecting to this discourse, what do you think are the major problems and difficulties in the cultural production scene of Berlin?

C: In my opinion, funding is the major problem in the

cultural production scene of Berlin. The vast majority of the Hauptstadtkulturfonds is given to established programmes, spaces, and a lot of it is suggested by some kind of patronage. We got funding for a show, but just after applying six or seven times. It is supposed to be for innovative projects. But a small amount went to contemporary art; a third of the money is going to institution like opera, established theatres. It's supposed to be for innovation, but it is quite the opposite – this is a cultural political theme.

r: How do you survive here? Do you get public funds?

C: We try to keep our over-head down as much as possible, we have donations from people, that allow us to pay our rent, and basic expenses, and then we get a mixture of some public funding, some funding from foundations, we end up doing it on a project by project basis. [...] This exhibition has decent funding; half of the next one and the previous two we did had really minimum funding, which was really frustrating for us. Our main goal is trying to make sure the artists get some kind of fee and their production is covered as much as possible, or if that is not possible, making sure that the work is sustainable, so the work can go on somewhere else, and be funded in a different way.

r: But don't you have funds from the Wedding area? A lot of galleries in Neukölln are opening, because of this kind of funding...

C: We have had funding from that. Neukölln is different, they are giving a lot of funding for experimental spaces, and that's really excellent, [Wedding belongs to the Bezirk Mitte] does not do that. More recently [it] has gotten much stricter, financing culture, and moved away to things like paying artists' fees, which was really nice for us. [...] The Netzwerk freier Berliner Projekträume und -initiativen, which is trying to represent this interest of off-spaces, is learning how to deal with politics, and the politicians are learning that this free scene exists.

r: Sometimes there are funds, but you never know where they allocate it.

C: My personal opinion is that it should be done by

administration and not by politicians, who obviously have their favourite theatres. And I think that the other problem here is gentrification creating rising rents. When the government came here in 2000, some wealth came to the city and that might have gentrified some parts of the city like Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte, but nowadays it's mainly speculation and this has a damaging effect. Neukölln and Kreuzberg are examples of possibilities and potentialities being priced out.

In new media, it's a recognition problem. There is so much art in Berlin, and the vast majority of it is painting, collage, drawing or some kind of post-conceptual installation. Working with new media is a small part of that, and I think it could be good to connect, to make a thread through the scene, because it would give more attention [...]. There are growing possibilities; meanwhile, if you are disconnected, little islands, you get lost in this mass of painting, drawing and collage. It could be interesting to bring together artist groups, curators, spaces, people connected to this amorphous group, and have regular meetings, exchanges and platforms, and I think transmediale is an interesting central node for this. [...]

To make these connections [...] a central space for the building of a community, I think at least in the beginning, we need a central node, and it could be something that a community builds, and then someone else can take [...] over.

Thinking of spaces, there is one huge idea I had a few years ago [...]. There has always been this idea of making a Kunsthalle in Berlin, and I have been very dubious about it, because every time a space is given over to a small mafia, and they create their own thinking, it's supposed to be inclusive and it never is. [...] [M]aybe an organisation like transmediale can say, we are about innovation, could we use [...] the space [meant to be for the new Kunsthalle]? [...] These are different options, and it also fits the thing that transmediale has this advantage of the hierarchy system in Berlin. It has a reputation; the Mayor knows what it is. It is much more likely of a project like this to happen than with a group from the independent scene.

Reputation means a lot. It's

about whom politicians know, about media attention, it means something. [...] I would say the main thing that transmediale could do in the next year or two is to provide a central connecting point to all these different scenes. [...] I think certainly being connected leads to more information, more potentialities, than being disconnected.

r: I agree, this is a bit what we want to do, but there is also the risk that we are going to patronise everything. The point is trying to see how we could serve as a connector, without becoming the beginning of a too centralised process. Have you ever tried to approach other galleries and cultural spaces?

C: We have tried, but we spent an awful lot of time filling [in] applications, meeting with people running foundations and so forth, so we went out and tried to meet interesting spaces and it got frustrating, because most of the places are showing stuff that we don't find interesting. So I'm always interested in something that is new, even a database in this direction would be fantastic, a database of places showing new media. [...]

r: What we are also thinking to do with the reSource on our first event is to start a mailing list, following the idea of bringing people together. This could be a good way to start a platform, and to create a kind of community.

C: That would be great. Building an online platform, a list of places, and information about them, list of things, upcoming events, this would be a wonderful resource. There are 400 commercial galleries in Berlin, and I can probably say most of them are not interesting for me, and 150 project spaces [of] which I don't know that many, and there are artist collectives and so forth.

N.B. As Christian de Lutz points out, a lot has changed in the last months after the first interview. The Netzwerk Berlin Projekträume has with some success lobbied the city for support for project spaces. The first prize for Berlin project spaces took place in autumn 2012, and Art Laboratory Berlin was one of the winners. And, most importantly, reSource has

indeed become a node for a growing network of spaces, curators and artists in Berlin working in technology-based arts.